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Theatrical revolution symbolized by the open stage is discussed. The mere absence of the proscenium arch can insure no more than an architectural modification. Any genuine and lasting artistic liberation must come with the attitudes guiding the use of the stage. The only valid principles are those which can point gently toward contemporary dramatic satisfaction while leaving room for the necessary continuing innovation in the future. Sense staging becomes a part of the play itself. It is more than a setting and a background--it is an environment that sometimes mingles with the meaning of the play itself. This approach means that the director and the designer work well as a team. They must be able to agree upon the varying emphasis that all these factors should receive in each separate production. Some plays will need only the simplest scenic touches. Others use effects that result in the technical director's having a direct relationship with the actors themselves. (RK)

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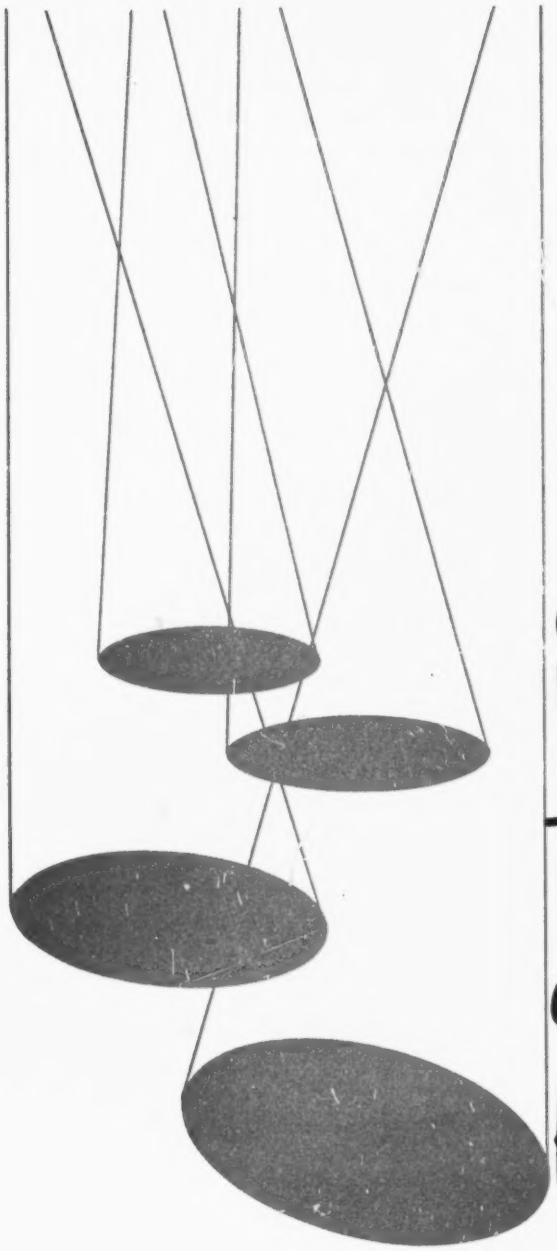

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SENSE STAGING.

The Results of 8 Years of Directing and Designing for the Open Stage

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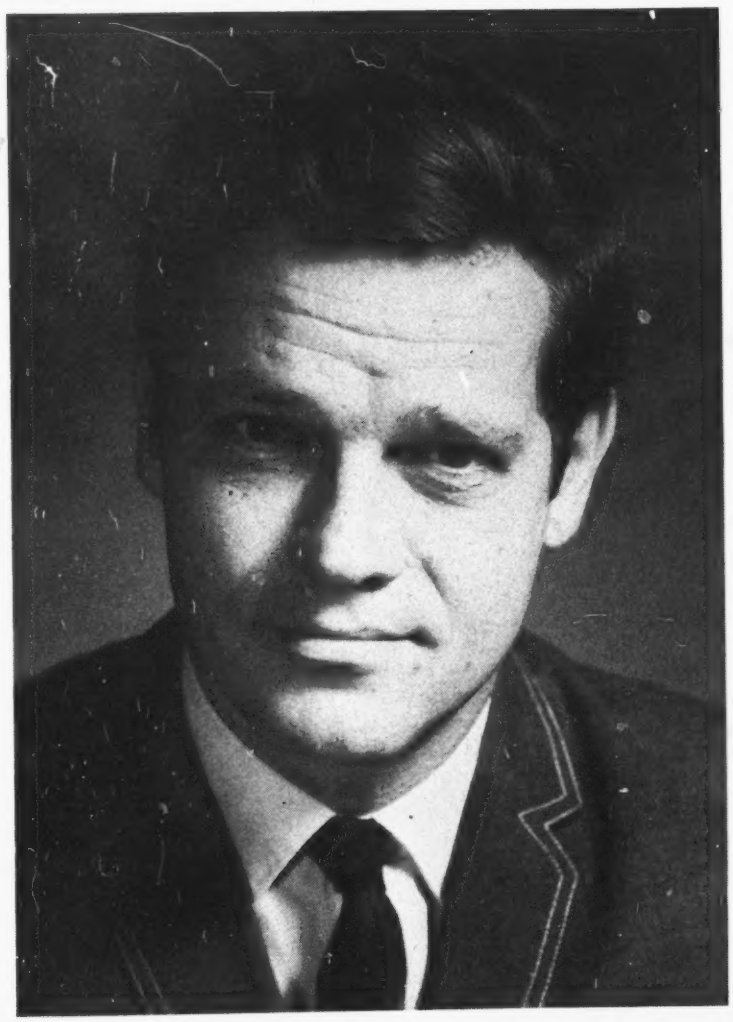

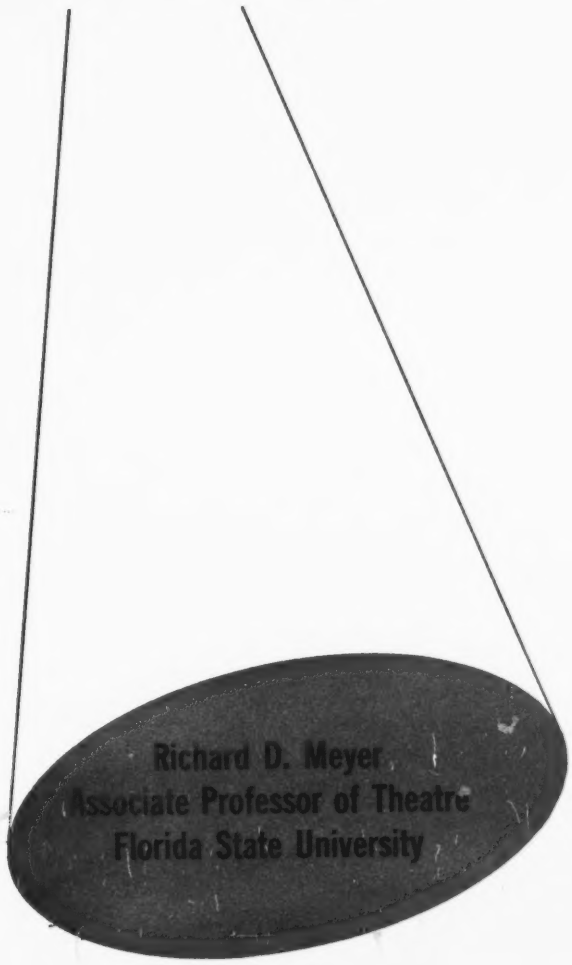

Richard D. Meyer is Associate Professor of Theatre at Florida State University where he is head of the Directing Program. He has produced for community theatre and summer stock, as well as educational theatre, and has had extensive experience in directing traditional plays and new scripts upon "open" stages. His articles have appeared in THEATRE ARTS, WESTERN HUMANITIES REVIEW, EDUCATIONAL THEATRE JOURNAL, and PLAYERS. He spent the 1963-64 year with the Lincoln Center Repertory Theatre, contributing a chapter to its commemorative volume, *THEATRE: Volume II*. He is now at work on a documentation of the beginnings of the Repertory Theatre and an analysis of Arthur Miller and his writings.

This Fall, 1968, Mr. Meyer will direct an Off-Broadway production of Roy S. Richardson's new play: *The Next Voyage of the Pequod*, at the Greenwich Mews Theatre. During the Summer of 1968, Mr. Meyer was Guest Director at the ASOLO THEATRE, in Sarasota, where he directed *Antigone*. This past year at Florida State University he directed Eddie Dowling in the Premiere of Robert Waldron's *No Silver Saints*. Mr. Meyer was formerly Director of Theatre at Grinnell College. He has also directed for summer stock, including The Kalamazoo Repertory Theatre in Michigan. During the season of 1963-64 he was an assistant to Elia Kazan at the Lincoln Center Repertory Theatre. His theatrical experience, dating back to 1946, includes the direction of more than sixty major productions.

He is a member of the following professional organizations: The American Theatre Association, American National Theatre and Academy, The United States Institute for Theatre Technology, and The Florida Theatre Conference.

There is a cyclical nature to any revolution, a circle that begins and ends (or begins again) with *theory*. When one theory becomes burdensome and constraining in its *dos* and *don'ts*, it is rebelled against. There follows a period of mixed hope and disillusionment, accompanied by the conscious application of non-theory. It is a time of experimentation when the rebels reject all rules and preclude no possibilities. The inevitable creeping return to theory is far more subtle than the original fleeing from it. The new principles that evolve deserve cautious scrutiny, lest they prove only a replacement of the old rules, just as arbitrary and just as blindly binding.

All this applies to the theatrical revolution symbolized by the open stage. The mere absence of the proscenium arch can insure no more than an architectural modification. Any genuine and lasting artistic liberation must come with the attitudes guiding the use of the stage. The only valid principles are those which can point gently toward contemporary dramatic satisfaction while leaving room for the necessary continuing innovation in the future.

Realism and Instinct

I have tried to apply this double perspective in examining my own experience with the open stage. My approach to it, as it seems to be developing, might be described as "Sense Staging." That seems to imply the right combination of realism and instinct. The term suggests both the end and the means, although the theory was born not out of philosophy but out of awareness that our traditional stockpile of theatrical effects was frequenlty inapplicable now and, in any case, exhaustible. New sources were essential to supply our appetite for something both new and relevant.

"Sense Staging," then, encompasses the notions occurring during eight years close acquaintance with the open stage. The first few years were spent in planning and building an open stage theatre. This period was one of dealing with ideas — considering the stage and the other details of the theatre structurally, we could only *conjecture* how successful their use would prove to be. The period involved a great deal of study of contemporary theatres and of past and present concepts of staging.

Testing Our Ideas

Now, after directing and designing for the new stage, a variety of those ideas have been put to test. Enthusiasm for the new freedom promised by the open stage was quickly tempered by the frustrations that accompany it. The frustrations are real and lasting, but one does come to terms with them and learn to minimize the problems and emphasize the advantages. Familiarity leads to techniques for overcoming difficulties and creating heretofore impossible effects. When the techniques began to fall into a pattern, I realized that I (for all unrestrained experimentation I advocated) was operating on an underyling theory of what a stage setting should be and a recognizable set of principles to facilitate good design on the open stage.

These principles are not a total departure from those applied to a traditional stage. More often they represent a variation in emphasis. And even these variations are not all new. Appia's theories of space staging, set forth in 1899, are just as valid today as they were then. They, along with some of the ideas of Gordon Craig, led to an exciting period in stage design in the thirties. In 1936, Lee Mitchell defined his method of space staging in equally contemporary terms.

What I have done is to apply theory to fact, or fact to theory, in an effort to determine *where* the artistry in open stage design lies. First, it is necessary to examine how it differs from traditional proscenium staging — that is, realism and the box set.

"Thrust" and "Open End" Stages

Consider the stage structurally. The term "open stage" can be used to apply both to the "thrust" stage and to the "open end" stage. The pure thrust is a jutting platform with a back wall, and in many ways it must be treated as arena staging. The open end stage *can* apply to an essentially traditional stage without proscenium. Design for an open end stage employs many of the principles of conventional design. I am more concerned — with those many variations of open stages in between. Essentially, the open stage is wide and without proscenium; the seats are more steeply raked; and the audience is wrapped around a deep apron. The open stage offers spacial freedom, a new actor-audience relationship and a de-emphasis upon scenery which promises increased concentration upon the actor and upon the action of the play.

These things are all true, but in actuality they must be qualified. The designer is likely to be struck first by the lack of normal tools of his trade. His most basic and dependable masking device is gone with the proscenium. A continuous flow of ceiling extending from the auditorium over the stage eliminates flyloft and rigging. Probably gone, too, is his offstage space for wagons and scene storage; if they are not gone, they are in full view of a good part of the wrap-around audience. Very likely the stage *itself* has deemphasized scenery more than the audience or even the director himself is ready to. The designer is left with demands for new, exciting scenery, but he must create it out of a bare floor and a lot of visible backstage and overhead. Most of the set pieces will end up being floor-based. Add to this the fact that furniture, props and costumes, all seen at closer range, must be better. The result is that the execution of the technical details will not only be more difficult but very likely more costly.

Problem of Spacial Freedom

The spacial freedom also proves to present its own problems. Artistically, designing on the open stage is like painting a picture directly on a wall, not using a frame. The design must create its own limits. "Islands of scenery", which have been suggested to accommodate quick changes once facilitated by rigging, can give the effect of spottiness, dissipation of interest, unless they are held together in a bold, balanced arrangement. The notion that an area can be clearly delineated by light is an erroneous one that does not take light spill into consideration. Spot-lighting can be effective,

but the notion that it can really replace masking can only lead to disappointment.

The designer is also called upon to assist the director in overcoming another problem created by the spaciousness of the stage. That is, the protracted exits and entrances. Plays involving such moments as the surprise arrival of a character create special difficulties. The open stage, both structurally and psychologically, suggests pure space and timelessness. It is more difficult to establish an identifiable locale, a feeling of outside-and-inside, or the feeling of confinement.

Considering the Sightlines

Another essential consideration of designing for the open stage are sightlines. The set seen by the center audience is not at all the set seen by the audience on either side. Only a third of the audience will see the actor against the back wall. The *center-oriented* pictorialization of traditional staging is no longer pertinent. The designer now works in three-dimensions, using back-to-front in his settings as much as, or more than, side-to-side. Hopefully, the rake of the audience will be sufficient for them to see both the set and the actors in this new depth.

What does all this add up to? It means that realistic staging is giving way to presentational staging. The box set is out. It may be approximated for those plays that seem to demand it, but it cannot be realized as well as it was on the old stages. The new stages, like the new drama, are not intended to present slices of life. They are abstract. They deal in Essence rather than things, in Truth rather than facts. The new design must take into consideration this approach, which affects the way in which it meets the same requirements that were *always* made of it: (1) It must be a suitable playing platform, upon which the actors can move with ease while meeting the demands of the script, (2) It must interpret the play, and (3) it must be aesthetically pleasing in itself.

Importance of Director's Interpretation

The first suggestion is not new, but it takes on greater importance than it ever has before. *The origin of design must be in the play and in the director's interpretation of the action.* The setting can no longer be a backdrop to be acted *in front of*. It now largely consists of levels to be walked *on* and set pieces to be walked *around*. It is part of the blocking and cannot be considered independently of it. A successful set must begin with an agreement between director and designer on where major scenes will take place and on the relationship between the actors at all key points in the show.

Once this has been established, the designer calls, as he always has, upon a sense of *artistic balance*. Here again, however, there is a difference with the open stage. Balance is complicated with the third dimension. What is satisfying from a seat on the right-hand side of the audience may not be nearly so satisfying when seen from the center or the left side. In practice, the designer depends less and less upon pencil and paper, even in the early stages of conceiving a set, and more and more upon models which can be viewed from all angles and shifted freely.

Establish a Focal Point

Now, with balance for the whole stage in mind, the designer must establish a *focal point*. He must create the center of attention that is no longer framed, at least in part, by the proscenium arch. Whatever shape it may take, whether it is accomplished by color, light or construction, it must serve to hold the eye and the mind upon the action of the play and eliminate distraction, for distraction becomes more of a problem with the increase in undelineated space and unmasked offstage areas.

Along with the form of the set, the designer must consider its *motif*. The open stage set never re-creates a place or a time; it suggests them. It makes a statement in form and texture and color. The designer's aim is not to reproduce but to transmit moods and feelings by selection of detail.

All this means that the designer now employs *symbolism*. He no longer fills the whole stage with the walls, the furniture and the accessories of a room. Now he chooses those details that are representative, and they take on an increased importance, for they must convey a meaning beyond just what they are. Sometimes they may be exaggerated; at all times they must be selected and executed with greater care.

Need for Variety

Another old principle which takes on new significance is the need for *variety*. I am thinking particularly of variety from one show to the next. The ready answers to the physical problems of the open stage are: platforms, projections and vertical, floor-based pieces such as columns or arches. The pure, simple lines of such architectural settings are pleasing, but their continued use, without imaginative innovations, can also become uninteresting and tiresome. Unable to fall back on traditional decoration and embellishments the designer must expand his own thinking for a fresh approach to the forms themselves and their relative positions on the stage.

The greatest aid in the search for variety is an increased use of non-scenic effects. That is, of technical devices not usually thought of as an integral part of the setting. As an example, in our production of "Tartuffe", we added a clavichord-violin-cello trio, wigged and costumed them in the period of the play, and sat them on the edge of our stage, which extends out to wrap around the audience. The musicians, playing 17th century music, did as much to establish the drawing room atmosphere of the play as did any other factor in the set. In another production called "War Without End", a documentary anti-war piece about World War I, we used a mass of platforms of varying levels and a complex lighting plot. Sometimes we spotted an individual, sometimes we silhouetted the group, whose movements were choreographed.

Beyond this, we introduced sound as an actual part of the setting, using electronic sounds co-ordinated with light changes. We also incorporated both slides and movies. On either side of the stage we suspended huge tattered flags, made of scrim. The script consists of quotes of the

rulers, generals, infantrymen and nurses of World War I. From time to time, pictures of the person quoted were projected onto one or the other of the scrims and the full spirit of that person and the words he uttered seem to fill the room.

Simultaneous Film Clips

In another section of the play directly concerning the battle itself, one, three or even five authentic film clips were used simultaneously. One was shown against the center cyc, two against the scrims, and two against the side walls of the auditorium itself. All were selected so that the movement seemed toward the center, where we at one point showed a film of repeated explosions, at another a looped sequence showing a soldier rising to shoot, being shot, falling back, and then rising again, over and over. At another time, the violence of the side films led to a motionless sequence of a desolate field with a broken fence. The overall effect of the production upon the audience was that they had been assaulted from all directions by the brutality of war. They had not *seen* the show; they had *experienced* it. Such was the intention of the script, and one that could be fully realized only through technical effect.

This, then, is what I think of as "Sense Staging." Traditionally, we have limited scene design to the set itself, which could reach the audience only through its eyes. The new staging goes beyond cool, clear vision. Through the senses, it woos or attacks the audience, informs or beguiles them — but always in the interest of the better understanding of the play. "Sense Staging" can be subliminal or intentionally visceral. It is also rational. The audience can *sense* its meaning. At the same time, it *makes sense.*

Fluidity of Sets

In practice, this means that the set need no longer be static, for it may move as the action of the play moves. It is fluid in time as well as space. It may begin before the play, as it did with the musicians of *Tartuffe,* or it may extend beyond the play. The final statement of the anti-war production was made after the play was over and the audience re-entered the lobby to find a display of Vietnam War pictures placed there during their absence. "Sense Staging" becomes a part of the play itself. It is more than a setting, more than a background. It is, rather, an environment that sometimes contains and sometimes mingles with the meaning of the play itself.

This approach means several things to the director and the designer. They are both required to be imaginative and creative. They are both less able to fall back on convention for solutions to their problems. But most important, it is more essential than ever that they have a rapport between them, that they work well as a team. They must be able to agree upon the varying emphasis that all these factors should receive in each separate production. Some plays will need only the simplest scenic touches. Others will use effects that result in the technical director's having a direct relationship with the actors themselves.

As the director and designer increase their understanding of the other's needs, they can combine their special talents. The result can be a new dimension in theatre production — one that takes advantage of the new facilities and makes the most of the new stages.